CHAPTER XXIV

THE PALAESTRA

The oblong court north of the Large Theatre, between the entrance of the Forum Triangulare and the temple of Isis, is the Palaestra. Originally, the enclosed area was entirely surrounded by a colonnade, with ten columns on the sides and five at each end; but at a comparatively late period, probably after the earthquake of 63, the columns at the east end were removed and the space thus gained was added to the temple of Isis.

A number of the columns on the other three sides are still standing. They are Doric but of slender proportions, the height, 10½ feet, being equal to eight diameters, while the intercolumniations measure about nine feet. It is doubtful whether the columns carried a complete entablature; more likely the roof rested directly on a wooden architrave.

The building clearly dates from the pre-Roman period. The columns are of tufa coated with stucco, the dimensions of the colonnade (90 by 36 Oscan feet) reduce to the early standard of measurement; and an Oscan inscription was found here which says that the building was erected by the Quaestor Vibius Vinicius, with money which Vibius Adranus had left by will to the Pompeian youth. The translation of the word vereitai, 'to the youth,' otherwise doubtful, is confirmed by various facts which indicate that the building was intended as a small palaestra or open-air gymnasiunm for boys.

While the Palaestra had its original length, the entrance, which is now nearer the east end, was at the middle of the north side. Opposite it, near the colonnade on the south side, is a pedestal of tufa, before which stands a small table of the
same stone (Fig. 76). The pedestal is reached by narrow steps. Here stood a statue of the patron divinity of the Palaestra. When an athletic contest was held, the wreath intended for the victor was laid on the stone table before the god; after the award had been made, the successful contestant took up the wreath and dedicated it to the divinity by mounting the steps and placing it on the head of the statue. It is evident from the height of the steps that the contestants were boys, not men.

![Fig. 76. — View of the Palaestra, with the pedestal, table, and steps.](image)

On the pedestal was undoubtedly a statue of Hermes, but not of the type which we have already met with in the court of the temple of Apollo (p. 88), and shall find later in the palaestra of the Stabian Baths (p. 200); a base of this sort can hardly have been intended for a herm. No trace of the missing statue has been discovered.

Another statue stood at the foot of one of the columns on the south side. It is a copy of the doryphorus of Polyclitus, and is now in the Naples Museum (Fig. 77). Though it has been restored, there seems no good reason to believe that the restoration is incorrect, and that the figure is really a Hermes, having originally carried on the left shoulder a herald's staff with entwined snakes, caduceus, instead of a spear.

For the adornment of a place devoted to athletic exercises nothing could have been more appropriate than a copy of the doryphorus as an ideal of youthful strength, of harmonious physical development; and the Elder Pliny bears witness (N. H. XXXIV. v. 18), that it was customary to set up such statues in a palaestra. This figure had no pedestal; it stood on the ground, a man among men.

At the west end of the court were dressing rooms where the boys, before exercising, could anoint themselves and afterwards could remove the oil and dirt with the strigil; such a dressing room in connection with a bath was called a dextrictarium. Water was brought into the court by a lead pipe, which passed through one of the columns at the right of the entrance and threw a jet either into a basin standing below or into the gutter in front of the colonnade.

It would be of interest to know what athletic exercises were practised in the Palaestra; but apart from the pedestal with its steps and table no characteristic remains were found here. The exercises in the Roman period undoubtedly differed somewhat from those practised at the time when the building was erected, when the Greek system was everywhere in vogue.